July 14, 2010
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Bureau
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator, Fisheries Division
Missoula Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Wayne Hadley, 1016 Eastside Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
Montana River Action Network, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
Missoula Conservation District
U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MT Partners Program, 922 Bootlegger Trail, Great Falls, MT 59404
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Blackfoot Chapter Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 1, Ovando, MT 59854
The Nature Conservancy, P.O. Box 8316, Missoula, MT 59807
MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, ATTN: Robert Storer, 1401 27th Ave., Missoula, MT 59804

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project calling to replace an existing undersized and perched culvert located on Bear Creek, a second order tributary to the lower Blackfoot River, with a free span bridge. The project also call for the removal of two additional undersized culverts; one located on Bear Creek and one located on the West Fork Bear Creek. Additionally, the project proposes to abandon and stabilize 5,300 feet of road located adjacent to the Bear Creek riparian corridor. The intent of the project is to enhance upstream fish passage to six miles of stream and reduce sediment inputs to Bear Creek. This proposed project is located on property currently owned by The Nature Conservancy approximately 5 miles west of the community of Potomac in Missoula County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., August 15, 2010 to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Helena at the address listed above. Funding for this project through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Section
Fisheries Bureau
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Bear Creek Culvert Replacement Project

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted statute 87-1-272 through 273 that directs the Department to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal.

The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for replacement of an existing undersized and perched culvert located on Bear Creek with a free span bridge. The project also proposes to remove two additional existing undersized culverts; one located on West Fork Bear Creek and one located on Bear Creek. Additionally, 5,300 feet of adjoining road would be abandoned and stabilized. The intent of the project is to enhance upstream fish passage to 6 miles of stream and to reduce sediment input into Bear Creek from an existing road paralleling the stream. This project is being proposed, in part, as a result of the initiation of the Montana Legacy Project that involves the purchase of 310,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber Company Lands located in western Montana by The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Lands. The project site is located approximately 5 miles west of the community of Potomac in Missoula County.

I. Location of Project: This project will be conducted on existing road crossings on Bear and West Fork Bear creeks located within Township 13 North, Range 17 West, Sections 13 and 24 in Missoula County (Attachment 1).

II. Need for the Project: One goal within Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) six-year operations plan for the fisheries program is to "restore and enhance degraded fisheries habitats" by implementing habitat restoration projects and administering the Future Fisheries Improvement Program to restore important habitats on private and public lands. This proposed project would help meet this goal.

Bear Creek is a second order tributary to the lower Blackfoot River that supports a mixed assemblage of fish including brook trout, brown trout, rainbow trout, and westslope cutthroat trout. A reach of Bear Creek was restored in 1999, and post project fisheries monitoring by MFWP has identified Bear Creek to be an increasingly important spawning and rearing tributary to the lower Blackfoot River. Improvements for fish passage in the Bear Creek drainage were begun following initiation of the Montana Legacy Project, involving the purchase of property from the Plum Creek Timber Company by The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land. The land in the Bear Creek drainage, currently owned by The Nature Conservancy, is scheduled to be transferred to the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation in the fall of 2010. A series of three existing road culverts located in the drainage currently act as partial fish migration barriers (Attachment 2). This proposed project involves replacing one of the culverts with a bridge, removing the other two culverts and abandoning and stabilizing about one mile of encroaching road located upstream of the confluence of the main stem and the West Fork. The completed project would enhance upstream fish passage and reduce sediment input into the stream channel.

III. Scope of the Project:

This proposed project would replace the existing undersized and perched culvert located on Bear Creek (stream mile 2.2) with a 24-foot steel bridge capable of passing a 500 year flood event. In addition, two existing undersized culverts, one located on the West Fork Bear Creek (stream mile 0.2) and one located on the main stem (stream mile 3.4), would be removed and a 5,300-foot segment of exiting road would be abandoned and stabilized. This project is expected to cost $56,315.00. Of this total, the Future Fisheries Improvement Program would be contributing up to $23,460.00. The remainder of the funding would come from outside sources and in-kind services:

Contributor	In-kind service	In-kind cash
USFWS		$5,000.00
DNRC	$3,000.00	
TNC/MFWP	$21,500.00	
Big Blackfoot TU	$600.00	$2,755.00

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Impacts to the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life and habitats.

Replacing an existing undersized and perched culvert with a free span bridge and the removal of two additional undersized culverts would create more stable stream crossings that would enhance upstream fish passage and improve migratory connectivity to approximately 6 miles of stream. This work would complement previous habitat enhancement work that has been completed in the drainage.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

Abandonment of approximately one mile of existing road that currently encroaches into the stream corridor would reduce sediment input into the active channel. For the culvert replacement and removals, short-term increases in turbidity will occur during project construction. To minimize turbidity, the operation of equipment in the active stream channel will be minimized to the extent practicable. The Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota (318 authorization). A 310 permit (Montana Natural Streambed and Land Preservation Act) will be obtained from the local conservation district and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers will be contacted to determine the need to meet 404 provisions of the Clean Water Act.

3. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture.

Soils in the vicinity of the three culverts would be temporarily disturbed during construction. All disturbed areas would be re-vegetated with a native grass seed mix.

4. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality.

The proposed abandonment and stabilization of 5,300 of existing roadway would encourage recovery of vegetation that had been previously disturbed.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy construction equipment.

7. Unique, endangered, fragile or limited environmental resources.

MFWP surveys have found very low densities of juvenile bull trout residing in Bear Creek. Enhancing fish passage and reducing sediment loading in the drainage has the potential to benefit bull trout.

9. Historic and archaeological sites

This site has been previously disturbed by the construction and maintenance of the existing roads and road crossings. As a result, there is a very low likelihood that cultural properties will be impacted by the completion of the proposed project. Should cultural materials be inadvertently discovered during the project, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted and the site will be investigated.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities.

Replacement of an existing undersized culvert with a bridge, the removal of two additional road culverts and the abandonment of a one mile segment of road that currently encroaches into the riparian corridor is expected to enhance the fisheries in the Bear Creek drainage and may improve recruitment of fish to the Blackfoot River.

14. Transportation networks & traffic flows.

The road crossings and road segment associated with this proposed project currently are under controlled access via a series of locked gates. As such, the public transportation network and traffic flow for the area will not change.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no funding is provided, the applicant will either have to seek other sources of funding to complete the project or the existing road crossings located within the Bear Creek drainage will continue to act

as partial fish passage barriers and migratory connectivity to six miles of stream will remain impaired. Additionally, an encroaching segment of road will continue to supply sediment to the active stream channel.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative is to provide partial funding to the Bear Creek culvert project through the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The funding would enable the applicant to replace an existing undersized culvert on Bear Creek with a free span bridge and to remove two additional undersized culverts. Additionally, a segment of roadway encroaching onto the active stream channel of Bear Creek would be abandoned and stabilized. The intent of the project is to improve overall habitat for all aquatic organisms in the Bear Creek drainage. This project would complement previous habitat enhancement work that has been completed in the drainage.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude from this review that the proposed activities will have a positive impact on the physical and human environment.

2. Level of public involvement.

The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the Future Fisheries Improvement Program. The Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission also will review the proposed project and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The Environmental Assessment (EA) is being distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter. The EA also will be published on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks webpage: fwp.mt.gov.

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on August 15, 2010

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Mark Lere, Program Officer
Habitat Protection Section
Fisheries Bureau
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1420 East 6th Avenue
Helena, MT 59620
Telephone: (406) 444-2432
e-mail: mlere@mt.gov

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
(406) 444-2535

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title Bear Creek Culvert Replacement Project
Division/Bureau Fisheries Bureau -Future Fisheries Improvement
Description of Project The Future Fisheries Improvement Program is proposing to provide partial funding for a project calling for replacing an undersized and perched culvert with a free span bridge on Bear Creek, a tributary to the lower Blackfoot River. The project also calls for removing two additional existing culverts and the abandonment and stabilization of approximately 5,300 feet of encroaching roadway. The intent of the project is to enhance upstream fish passage and to reduce sediment inputs into the active stream channel. The project site is located approximately 5 miles west of the community of Potomac in Missoula County.

POTENTIAL IMPACT ON PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

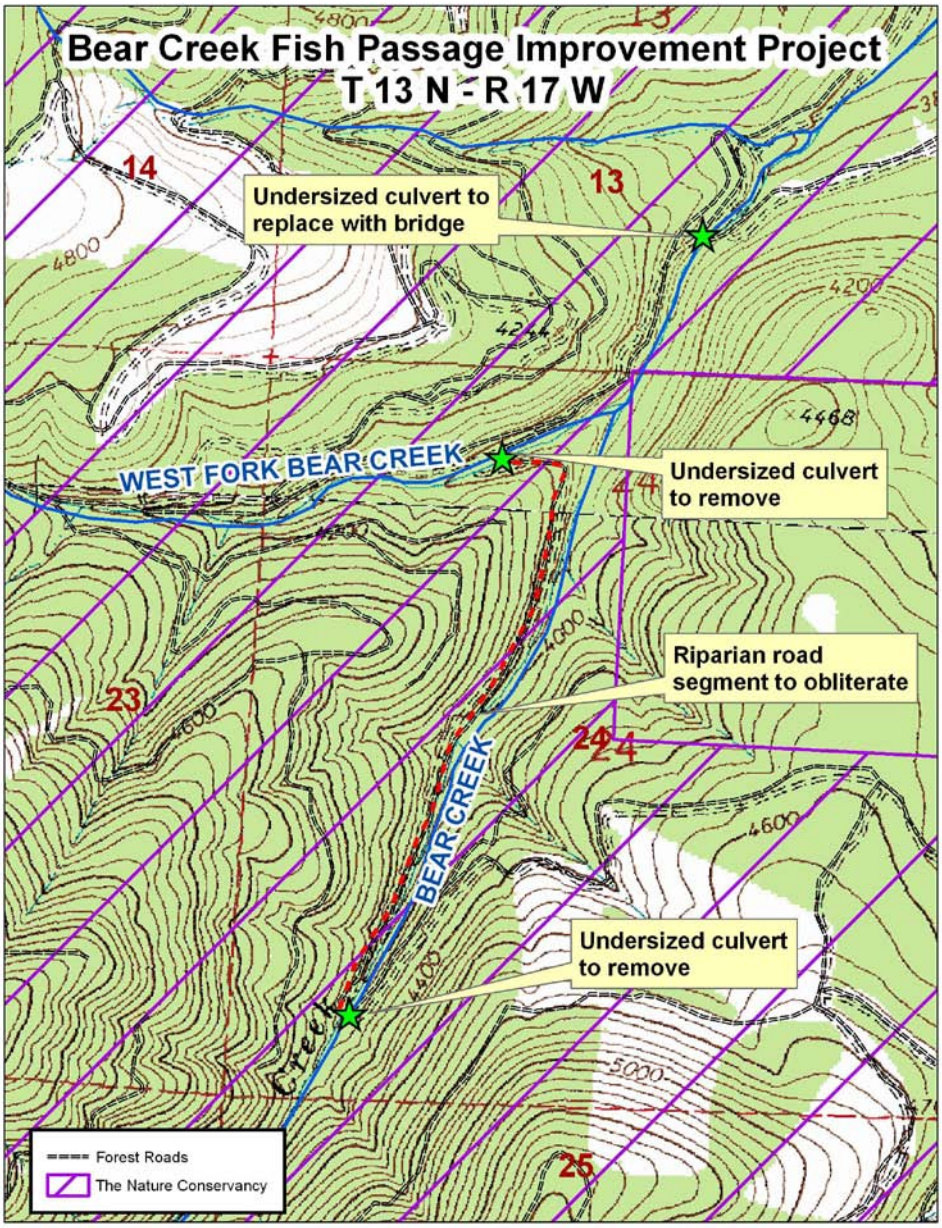
	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture			X			X
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites				X		X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production				X		
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals				X		
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		X

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction Missoula Conservation District, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Montana Department of

Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office
Individuals or groups contributing to this EA Ryen Aasheim, Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited
Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.
EA prepared by: Mark Lere
Date: July 6, 2010



ATTACHMENT 1

Photo of Bear Creek culvert proposed to be replaced by a free span bridge.

Photo of one of the Bear Creek culverts proposed for removal

ATTACHMENT 2